



## **K&K Tiny But Mighty Popcorn, Shellsburg**

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### **Gene Mealhow**

#### **K&K Tiny but Mighty Popcorn**

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<http://www.kandkpopcorn.com/news.html>

Gene and Lynn Mealhow, and their sons, have been producing K&K Tiny But Mighty Popcorn® since the late 1990s. Gene is a third-generation family farmer and soil consultant by profession; he continues to consult with farmers regarding organic certification. He bought the popcorn business from Richard Kelty, whose family had farmed in Urbana, IA for several generations. In fact, Kelty first called upon Gene to help increase his popcorn yield.

Gene's first reaction when he encountered the corn was "What in the world is this stuff?" He began consulting with experts from around the United States, and discovered that the tiny K&K kernel is most likely a variety of flint corn. The Kelty and Kramer families either found it growing in Iowa when they settled here in the 1850s, or they traded for it with local Indians. It may have even originated in the western states. It is widely understood that open-pollinated varieties originated from Indian seed corn.

According to Richard Kelty, original owner of K&K Popcorn, his great, great, great-grandfather, Samuel Kelty, settled just northwest of what is now Cedar Rapids in the 1850s. While no one in his family knows exactly where the seed came from, they believe it came from Indian neighbors. When Richard Kelty returned home from the army in the mid-1970s, he found the last remaining seed in a fruit jar. He popped some and planted the rest—and a new business was born.

What makes K&K popcorn unique, besides its tiny kernels and disintegrating hulls, is that it is open pollinated. A 128-day corn, K&K is also difficult to raise, process, and keep its integrity. Gene consulted with a popcorn breeder from Idaho, who said K&K was a rare variety. Because it is hard to breed, most people in the popcorn industry wanted nothing to do with it. Openpollinated corn has many different genetic traits that are difficult to isolate. According to Mealhow, it requires significant time and effort to identify and select the specific traits he wants to improve the stalks' ability to stand up as well as their yield.

Mealhow, experienced in a variety of agriculture-related businesses, is fascinated by this unique and tasty popcorn. In the 1980s, when his father and uncle left farming, Gene plowed forward.

He started to look at the whole picture involving groundwater and chemicals, and decided to go organic. Gene joined a soil consulting firm, which advised farmers about soil nutrients, seed selection, and the like. One of Gene's first customers in the early 1990s was Richard Kelty, who brought Mealhow in to reduce his waste and increase his yield. The popcorn stalks were falling down and producing only 600 lbs per acre, which was not commercially viable.

As Gene tells it, in the very first year, Kelty's corn crop "went nuts." Yield went from 600 to 1000 lbs. per acre, and he cut the throwaway by 10%. One of the early challenges was getting threeinch long ears to fill to the tip. Gene notes that it was "totally fun to work with Richard." The two changed something each year—upped population, planted deeper, selected for certain traits, and planted different seeds. After five or six years, Kelty told Mealhow that he wanted to sell his popcorn business. Gene tried to discourage him—after all, Kelty was the oldest son of more than three generations of farmers. But Kelty's sons didn't want the business.

Mealhow did his best to help Gene find someone, and told anyone who would listen about the amazing popcorn. One day, his wife's cousin, an advertising executive in Minneapolis, tried some of the popcorn and asked what it was. Gene told him the story about Richard, and the cousin was so fascinated that he traveled to Iowa to visit the Kelty farm and tour the production facility. Ultimately, he suggested that Gene just buy it himself. After discussing the proposition with his wife, Lynn, Mealhow asked Richard to sell them the business. According to Gene, Kelty's answer was, "I was wondering how long it would take you." In typical low-key Iowa style, Kelty said he wanted to sell it to Mealhow all along—but he wasn't going to tell him that; he'd have to come to it on his own.

The Mealhows face certain challenges with this popcorn. Gene still has to figure out how to keep the stalks from falling down, which requires more breeding work. He needs to select plants with the fullest ears and strongest stalks, and propagate those. This can be especially labor-intensive given the open-pollination method and the need to bring forward promising recessive traits. He is also hoping to find new varieties that can be used in other organic corn products. Since Gene already works with the Hawkeye Community College Horticulture Department, he'd prefer to turn the genetic research over to students and give them not only the firsthand experience but also pass on his knowledge of raising an open pollinated variety of corn.

The other challenge with K&K popcorn is converting it all to organic production. Weed control is the issue, and Gene needs another year or two to convert all the fields. His own farm will be certified organic again this year. Except for limited use of herbicide on some of the growers' fields, K&K maintains organic standards. Gene has never used fumigants, sprays, or pesticides in processing after the popcorn is harvested.

At this point, K&K Tiny But Mighty Popcorn® is taking off. In 2005, Jan Michaelson of WHO in Des Moines interviewed Mealhow, who participates in food shows in Chicago to promote his product. K&K's website now allows customers to purchase the popcorn using a credit card as well as mail order. Mealhow is currently working with Fareway®, Hy-Vee®, Whole Foods Market®, and other natural food grocery chains to continue increasing sales.

For the Mealhows, popcorn is not just a business. It's their passion, and Tiny But Mighty is a product they do not want to die. One of their biggest pleasures is meeting customers, who range from friends to people throughout the United States. In fact, Gene doesn't like to use the word "customer"; instead, he builds friendships with people who enjoy Tiny But Mighty Popcorn. He

trusts those who buy his popcorn via mail to just send back their payment by personal check; “I’ve never been stiffed.” At a recent trade show in Chicago, Mealhow was thrilled to have a mother say to her kids, “This is a real farmer, and he’s from Iowa.”

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Funding for this project was provided by grants from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University.